

## **BASS LINES**

**Bass players in symphony orchestras often find they have long passages with nothing to play, so they draw pictures all over their instruments. In jazz, it's different - they tend to play all the time. This is a guide to what they play. Read on.**

## BASS LINES FROM CHORD SYMBOLS

Constructing bass lines from chord symbols is not only a useful skill but is regarded as essential in most forms of music outside of classical music.

The bass note of the chord is the most important note and will usually be played on the first beat of the bar or where the chord changes. The second most important note is the fifth of the chord ie. the note a perfect fifth above the bass note. If the 5th is altered, that is, lowered or raised it will be indicated in the chord symbol.

Eg in a C chord, the fifth is the G.

In a C7(-5), sometimes written as C7 (b5) the note in question is the Gb (or F#).

In a C7(+5), sometimes written as C7(#5) the note in question is the G# (or Ab).

Note that where the bass plays just root and fifth lines, the fifth is usually played below the root, ie. down a perfect 4th.

Root and fifth lines are found in a lot of march tunes, older show tunes and in different types of Latin American music such as sambas, bossa novas, beguines, chachas, and many mambos and salsa tunes. It is also found in older dance band tunes.



The second version is more common in Latin music.

In jazz or dance music which has a swing feel, you will often need to play 4 notes to a bar. It was once fashionable to double up the notes - CCGG, for example but this is now very old hat. Where you get chord changes which occur every 2 beats, you may get away with playing just the root notes, repeating each one but this is not recommended for a long passage. Even so, it is best to go up or down the octave to give a bit of variety.

A better plan, where the chord changes every 2 beats is to play another note in the chord on the second and fourth beats. It is also possible to play the note a semitone below the root note of the next chord on those beats.

Where the chord changes last for 4 beats or more, you have two main options: to play arpeggios or scalar passages.

To play arpeggios you must take note of the type of chord, thus:

a major chord (or major 6th or major seventh) has a major 3rd.

a minor chord (or minor 6th or minor seventh) has a minor 3rd.

a dominant seventh chord (denoted by a 7,9,11 or 13th) has a major 3rd and a minor 7th (note)

a diminished chord has a minor 3rd and a flattened 5th and a sixth

a half-diminished chord has a minor 3rd and a flattened fifth and a minor 7th.

Thus, 4 notes on a C chord could be:

C E G C, C E G E, C E G A, C E G B  
C G E C, C G E G, etc.

In a C minor chord, substitute Eb's for the E's.

In the other method, you can use scalar passages to link up chordal notes, eg.  
CDEG C EFG CGFE CGAB, CGED

Where you see a slash chord, eg Dm7/C, it means Dm7 on C so it is important to play the note after the slash. (ie have a slash and then play the note).

For long passages on the one chord the bass has a lot more liberty to play interesting lines instead of just the functional notes, particularly where a modal feel is required.

Apart from playing 4's ("walking"), the bass can also play a more broken-up line. This approach has been around for some time. When a 2-feel occurs, the bass can play the root on the first beat and then fill in for the rest of the bar but still maintaining the 2-feel. A more open broken-up feel, pioneered by such people as Scott LaFaro with the Bill Evans Trio, is characterised by its strong counterpointal lines.

Good bass playing is often a mixture of scales and arpeggios. The best way to learn how to do it is to learn about chords and the scales to which they are related and practice until it becomes natural.

Footnote: With bands shrinking in size it is becoming increasingly important for pianists to be able to play a bass line in their right hand. This is a skill that needs to be worked at. Concentrate first on getting the right notes (especially the root notes) and playing in time. Then try and develop lines. It is often useful to have a few patterns under your belt so that when your right hand is having to play something important you can put your left hand on automatic pilot.

## A GUIDE TO BIG BAND BASS PLAYING

Playing in a big band requires a very different mentality from playing in a combo. Each has its merits; on the other hand each has its share of problems. These notes, written from the vantage point of an arranger, may help you to get round some of the difficulties of playing in a big band and shed some light on what is expected of you.

Combos are ideal for innovative jazz-playing and provided all of the players are competent and sympathetic to one another can be extremely flexible, allowing tempo changes, alternative chords and impromptu changes of rhythm with relative ease. Musicians are also able to cover up mistakes (skipped beats/ bars, wrong notes, etc) so as to be imperceptible to the majority of listeners. Yet all too frequently this can be taken to extremes and the playing can become slapdash and the self-indulgence of players can overshadow the cohesiveness of the group.

Big bands by their very nature are less flexible and require more discipline from each of the players. All it needs in a horn section is for one person to play wrong notes or timing or not to observe the dynamics and the whole section or ensemble suffers. The band will sound amateurish and individual members will become disgruntled.

Fortunately, the sacrificing of a certain amount of self-expression is made up for by other things. A really tight big band can provide a wonderful sense of exhilaration, particularly in punchy passages, while soft sustained chords in a ballad can ooze warmth. The range of tone colours and variations of texture and intensity are tremendous and the ability to interweave lines against each other and to layer them on top of one another cannot be duplicated by a small band.

There are other advantages from playing in a big band. Many great players, (Parker, Gillespie, Brookmeyer, Getz, Phil Woods, Kenny Wheeler, etc) "served an apprenticeship" in a big band. Many of them have acknowledged the usefulness of the discipline that is needed, plus the help it provides in reading music. These benefits can then be applied to small-group settings.

So what about the bass? The bass is one of the king-pins in a big band. It has a number of functions. **The bass has to provide the root-notes of the chords.** Omit the root-notes and the whole edifice can collapse. In the Swing Era, most of the harmony was firmly anchored by the baritone sax or the bass trombone or sometimes by both in unison. The bass player was often merely reinforcing the root-notes a lot of the time. This is no longer the case. Nowadays, the trombone or sax section is not voiced from the root but from the next voice up. Similarly, in a lot of flowing ensemble passages, there is no root-note present on the bottom. The lowest voice in the horns may be in the octave below middle C. Therefore the bass must play the root-note where necessary (1st beat of the bar usually) **and** it must provide a counterweight to the powerful upper voices in the trumpets and saxes in its most powerful and resonant register.

**The bass must also provide the beat.** The drums also have this function, but it is the bass with its definite pitch which is the main prompt to the horn players in

determining where they are. It follows then that the bass line must be well-defined and easy to follow for the sake of the rest of the band. Simple lines with few notes are often what is required to help keep the band together. If one section gets adrift from another section, it is almost impossible to get everyone together again for quite a time. (Sections are guided by the lead-players and if one person gets out, they all do.) When it comes to a solo backed just by the rhythm section, the bass can have more freedom but it is as well to guide the rest of the band in when the time comes (usually near a rehearsal mark).

**The bass is sometimes called upon to bolster up a passage in the low register**, in unison with the trombones, low saxes or piano. Accuracy is what is called for here, so reading the written part *as is* is very important. Nevertheless, because the part is covered by other instruments, it can if necessary be simplified.

**The bass may have to depart from its walking line to play a rhythmic figure** with a section or with the rhythm section or sometimes with the ensemble. In this instance, there is little scope for simplification - unless the part is impossible to play.

**The bass is also a part of the rhythm section** and must function as part of a team within a bigger team. In this respect the bass player's job is the same as in a combo.

There are other points which arise out of these functions which are important.

**The dynamic level** is usually far higher than with a small band. To play loudly or louder than you may be used to can take some getting used to, especially if you are unsure of the parts. But be brave. If you play too softly and you are not heard by everyone the band can collapse. Although dynamics may not be marked on the part, you will have to judge the level yourself and play quieter in soft passages and behind solos with no horn backing than in shouting passages.

**Good intonation** is vital. Check your intonation with the piano as you play as the front-line players may be doing the same thing. But also try and blend in with the pitching of the horns. Intonation can be a problem if there is an out-of-tune player in the band or if the piano is out of tune. Certain big band players have a big thing about intonation - and quite rightly so, as a closely-voiced chord can sound dreadful if people are out of tune.

**Getting lost** - It is easy to do and most people get lost at one time or another. The problem with playing bass is that if you are lost everyone will know. If the third trumpet gets lost, he can just lay out and others in the section will help him/her out. Counting is sometimes necessary to keep your place in the music. If you do get lost, listen out and try and find it again. You can also be helped by the conductor.

*A final problem that most bass players face is having to balance a long piece of music on a small music stand. Turning over a page can be difficult. Knocking over the stand with all the music on it can be easy. You can usually solve this problem by folding the music in a certain way, by memorizing a few bars where the turn occurs, or by putting a long piece of something lightweight under the music. Oh and if you can't see the music, do complain before you set fire to the music. Good luck.*